

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DUBLIN 02918 01 OF 02 231549Z
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UNCLAS SECTION 1 OF 2 DUBLIN 2918

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SUBJECT: ARTICLE IN SUNDAY TIMES, DECEMBER 18, 1977 UNDER HEADING
FIVE YEARS OF BRITISH MUDDLE BY GARRET FITZGERALD,
LEADER OF FINE GAEL, THE PRINCIPAL OPPOSITION PARTY
IN DAIL EIREANN

BEGIN TEXT:

WHY HAS THERE BEEN SO LITTLE PROGRESS TOWARDS A SOLUTION TO THE
NORTHERN IRELAND PROBLEM IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS? UNTIL 1972 THERE
WAS PROGRESS OF A KIND. THUS IN THE LATE 1960S THE NATIONALIST
OR CATHOLIC POPULATION THERE ACCEPTED THE NEED - WHILE THE CIVIL
RIGHTS CAMPAIGN DEMANDED THE RIGHT - TO JOIN IN MAKING THE STATELET
WORK. THAT DID NOT PRODUCE THE LOGICAL COROLLARY - ACCEPTANCE BY
THE PROTESTANT UNIONISTS OF THE RIGHT OF THE NATIONALISTS TO A
FULL ROLE IN RUNNING ITS AFFAIRS; BUT IT DID FORCE A RETHINKING
OF ATTITUDES IN THE REPUBLIC.

IN SEPTEMBER, 1969, MY OWN PARTY, FINE GAEL, REVERSED THE
TRADITIONAL IRREDENTIST LINE OF MOST POLITICIANS IN THE REPUBLIC
- WHICH WAS THAT NORTHERN IRELAND HAD NO RIGHT TO EXIST AND THAT
BRITAIN SHOULD "HAND IT OVER" TO US - AND DECLARED INSTEAD
THAT POLITICAL REUNIFICATION COULD COME ABOUT ONLY WITH THE CON-
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PAGE 02 DUBLIN 02918 01 OF 02 231549Z

SENT OF A NORTHERN MAJORITY. THE SAME APPROACH WAS ADOPTED BY
OUR LABOUR PARTY, AND MORE HESITANTLY BY FIANNA FAIL. THESE
CHANGES, TOGETHER WITH THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF CROSS-BORDER
SECURITY COOPERATION AND PERSONAL CONTACTS ACROSS THE BORDER,
WENT A LONG WAY TOWARDS EXORCISING THE GHOST OF A THREAT FROM
THE SOUTH.

SIMULTANEOUSLY, SUCCESSIVE BRITISH GOVERNMENTS PLAYED THEIR PART. FIRST, IN THE AUTUMN OF 1969, THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT ENDED WEST-MINSTER'S LONG ABDICATION OF SOVEREIGNTY AND ENFORCED WIDE-RANGING POLITICAL, ADMINISTRATIVE AND LEGAL REFORMS. THEN, AFTER THE MASSACRE AT DERRY IN JANUARY, 1972, HAD SHOWN THE DANGERS OF ALLOWING THE BRITISH ARMY TO BECOME THE TOOL OF A SECTARIAN-DOMINATED PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION, THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT UNDER TED HEATH ABOLISHED STORMONT AND RULED OUT ITS RE-ESTABLISHMENT UNTIL THE TWO PARTS OF THE COMMUNITY COULD BE INTEGRATED INTO A NEW STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT.

THE BLAME

BUT THAT WAS FIVE YEARS AGO. WHAT HAD GONE WRONG SINCE? FIRST - AND, FOR ME AT LEAST, THIS IS HINDSIGHT - THE SUNNINGDALE SOLUTION, WHILST A NOBLE VENTURE, CAN NOW BE SEEN TO HAVE ATTEMPTED TOO MUCH TOO SOON, AND ON TOO NARROW A BASE, SO FAR AS NORTHERN UNIONISM WAS CONCERNED. ALL OF US SHARE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS. FOR ONE THING, WE OVERESTIMATED BRIAN FAULKNER, BELIEVING THAT THE POLITICAL SKILL HE HAD SHOWN IN REACHING THE TOP WITHIN NORTHERN IRELAND MEANT THAT HE COULD JUDGE ACCURATEDLY WHAT HE COULD "SELL" TO HIS FELLOW UNIONISTS.

BUT GIVEN THAT, FOR MANY REASONS, SUNNINGDALE FAILED, WHY HAS NO PROGRESS BEEN MADE FOUR YEARS LATER IN PUTTING SOMETHING IN ITS PLACE? HERE A GOOD DEAL OF THE BLAME MUST REST, I FEAR, WITH UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 03 DUBLIN 02918 01 OF 02 231549Z

BRITISH POLITICIANS. JUST AS IN SPEAKING OR WRITING IN IRELAND I HAVE ALWAYS CONCENTRATED ON OUR IRISH MISTAKES AND DEFICIENCIES - EVEN AT THE RISK OF BEING CALLED PRO-BRITISH - SO I FEEL OBLIGED IN WRITING IN THE SUNDAY TIMES TO PLACE SOME EMPHASIS ON THOSE OF BRITAIN'S MISTAKES WHICH SEEM TO ME RELEVANT TO THE IMPASSE OUT OF WHICH ROY MASON IS NOW TRYING TO FIND A WAY.

IF DEVELOPED GOVERNMENT IS TO BE RE-ESTABLISHED IN NORTHERN IRELAND, TWO FURTHER PRECONDITIONS ARE NECESSARY (BESIDES THOSE ALREADY MET - CONTINUED NATIONALIST WILLINGNESS TO JOIN IN ITS ADMINISTRATION AND CONTINUED ACCEPTANCE IN THE REPUBLIC THAT REVUNIFICATION DEPENDS ON NORTHERN MAJORITY CONSENT). THOSE TWO CONDITIONS ARE THE DEFEAT OF VIOLENCE, BUT CONVINCING THE IRA THAT IT CANNOT WIN, AND THE EROSION OF UNIONIST INTRANSIGENCE BY MAKING IT CLEAR TO LOCAL UNIONIST POLITICIANS THAT THEY WILL NEVER SEE POWER AGAIN UNTIL THEY AGREE TO SHARE IT, FOR A PERIOD AT LEAST, WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE MINORITY - PENDING THE EMERGENCE OF NORMAL POLITICS IN WHICH, WITH THE EBB AND FLOW OF OPINION ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES, POWER CAN BE EXPECTED TO ALTERNATE BETWEEN GROUPS.

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PAGE 01 DUBLIN 02918 02 OF 02 231619Z
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UNCLAS SECTION 2 OF 2 DUBLIN 2918

UNFORTUNATELY, BRITISH POLITICIANS, WHILE COMMITTED IN PRINCIPLE TO THE POLICIES OF DEFEATING THE IRA AND OF "NO DEVOLUTION WITHOUT POWER-SHARING," HAVE REPEATEDLY UNDERMINED THESE POLICIES IN PRACTICE. THEY HAVE KEPT THE IRA ALIVE FOR YEARS AFTER IT MIGHT HAVE DIED A NATURAL DEATH, BY ENTERING INTO DEALINGS WITH IT THAT REPEATEDLY DELUDED IRA LEADERS INTO THINKING THAT THEY ONLY HAD TO HANG ON FOR ANOTHER SIX MONTHS OR ANOTHER YEAR, IN ORDER TO NEGOTIATE WITH A BRITISH GOVERNMENT THE WITHDRAWAL OF BRITISH TROOPS.

DESPITE REPEATED WARNINGS AND APPEALS FROM IRISH GOVERNMENTS (WHICH HAVE HAD TO FACE THE IRA THREAT TO THE EXISTENCE OF THE IRISH STATE FOR OVER HALF A CENTURY AND WHICH DO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE IRA'S PSYCHOLOGY), WE HAVE SEEN HAROLD WILSON COMING TO DUBLIN OFFICIALLY AS LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION AND HOLDING A SECRET MEETING WITH THE IRA BEHIND THE BACKS OF HIS HOSTS (WHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD, INCIDENTALLY, WOULD A BRITISH OPPOSITION LEADER PERPETRATE SUCH A TREACHEROUS ACT AGAINST A FRIENDLY GOVERNMENT?); WE HAVE SEEN WILLIE WHITELAW - IN MOST OTHER RESPECTS AN OUTSTANDING NORTHERN IRELAND SECRETARY - INVITING THE IRA LEADERS TO MEET HIM IN LONDON; AND WE HAVE SEEN MERLYN REES INSTRUCTING HIS OFFICIALS TO ENTER INTO AND TO REMAIN IN CONTACT WITH THE IRA'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES.

CAN ANYONE WONDER THAT THE IRA HAVE KEPT ON WITH THEIR HOPELESS COMPANION IN THE FACE OF SUCH ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THEIR DELUSIONS,
UNCLASSIFIED

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PAGE 02 DUBLIN 02918 02 OF 02 231619Z

OR THAT IT IS ONLY NOW, WHEN THESE CONTACTS HAVE APPARENTLY CEASED, THAT THEY ARE SHOWING SIGNS OF WEAKENING?

SECONDLY, BETWEEN 1974 AND 1977 BOTH THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND THE BRITISH OPPOSITION FAILED TO IMPLEMENT THEIR "NO DEVOLUTION WITHOUT POWER-SHARING" POLICY WITH THE NECESSARY FIRMNESS AND CLARITY. REPEATEDLY THEY SEEMED TO SLIDE AWAY FROM THIS COMMITMENT, OMITTING IT FROM IMPORTANT POLICY STATEMENTS, OR WATERING IT DOWN TO MEANINGLESS PHRASES WHICH, OF COURSE, OPTIMISTIC UNIONISTS INTERPRETED - WRONGLY - AS LETTING THEM OFF THE POWERSHARING HOOK.

TRAGIC PEOPLE

THE TORIES WELCOMED ANTI-POWER-SHARING UNIONISTS TO THEIR CONFERENCES, THUS LEADING THEM UP THE GARDEN PATH AND ENCOURAGING THEIR INTRANSIGENCE. SIMULTANEOUSLY, THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT, THROUGH THE SINISTER INTERMEDIACY OF ENOCH POWELL, AND LATTERLY THROUGH THE AGENCY OF THE LEADER OF THE HOUSE, MICHAEL FOOT, IN HIS "RE-INSURANCE" DISCUSSIONS WITH SOME OF THE LOYALISTS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, DESIGNED TO PROTECT THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF A BREAKDOWN OF THE LIB-LAB PACT, HAVE BEEN WEAKENING THE CREDIBILITY OF THE "NO DEVOLUTION WITHOUT POWER-SHARING" POLICY OF THE GOVERNMENT SIDE OF THE HOUSE. PITY POOR ROY MASON TRYING TO DO HIS JOB AGAINST THIS MEASMIC BACKGROUND.

PITY STILL MORE THE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN IRELAND, WHO HAVE TO GO ON SUFFERING VIOLENCE YEAR AFTER YEAR IN THE ABSENCE OF A POLITICAL SOLUTION, AND WHOSE TRAGIC POSITION, EXCEPT IN THE PRE-SUNNINGDALE SITUATION, HAS HARDLY EVER SECURED THE WHOLE-HEARTED ATTENTION OF A WESTMINSTER GOVERNMENT, WITHOUT WHICH ANY SOLUTION IS IMPOSSIBLE.

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PAGE 03 DUBLIN 02918 02 OF 02 231619Z

IN PINPOINTING THESE DEFICIENCIES OF BRITISH PERFORMANCE I AM NOT EXEMPTING FROM RESPONSIBILITY ANY OF THE OTHER PARTNERS IN THE TASK OF FINDING A SOLUTION TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND PROBLEM. THE INTRANSIGENCE OF THE UNIONISTS IS NOT EXCUSED BY BRITISH MUDDLING. POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE REPUBLIC, WHICH HAVE CERTAINLY MADE GREAT PROGRESS WITH THEIR NORTHERN IRELAND POLICIES SINCE THE 1960S, HAVE ALSO BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR MISTAKES; WE HAVE AT TIMES SHOWN LESS IMAGINATION AND COURAGE THAN WE MIGHT HAVE DONE. THE MESS COULDN'T HAVE CONTINUED FOR SO LONG IF THERE HADN'T BEEN MISTAKES ALL ROUND. KRENE

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